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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 000411

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SUBJECT: U/S HUGHES VISIT ENERGIZES US-RP TIES

REF: MANILA 000299

11. SUMMARY: Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes visited the Philippines January 24-27 to survey Mission's multi-agency, multi-disciplinary public diplomacy programs and projects. She met with a wide range of Filipinos, including President Arroyo, adult and youth alumni of USG exchange/training programs from across the Philippines, and poor Muslim villagers on the terror-wracked island of Jolo. At all stops, she was greeted warmly and enthusiastically, and her interlocutors expressed gratitude for U.S. assistance that ranges from educational exchanges and cultural programs, to veterans' benefits, to development projects to U.S. military technical support. Local and international media coverage was extensive and uniformly positive. Images of her visit to the Philippines can be seen at <http://philippines.usembassy.gov>. While the visit provided U/S Hughes with a ground-level view of public diplomacy efforts here in the Philippines, she also reached out to Filipinos one-on-one, in group events and through the media, robustly buttressing our continuing message that our country is a staunch partner, interested in their welfare, and committed to helping them where we can. The warm, personal, and much publicized welcome that U/S Hughes received from President Arroyo was a particularly meaningful statement about where we stand in Filipino estimation following the summit of ASEAN leaders and the state visit of the Chinese premier just days earlier. END SUMMARY

Partnership for Peace and Prosperity

12. U/S Hughes' program began on January 24 with a small, private dinner at Malacanang Palace (reftel). Afterward, she and other guests were invited to join President Arroyo and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Esperon, as they awarded medals and promotions to the Philippine soldiers and marines responsible for eliminating two Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorist leaders on the island of Jolo. President Arroyo's energetic remarks at the event urged the AFP to keep up the pressure on the terrorists, expressed gratitude to President Bush for sending U/S Hughes, and publicly thanked the U.S. for being the "Philippines' strongest ally and partner." These remarks were widely reported in the Philippines media, and were particularly significant as they came scant days after the state visit of the Chinese premier.

Winning Hearts and Minds: The Key Battle

13. On January 25, U/S Hughes traveled to the island of Jolo, the focal point of ongoing AFP efforts to eliminate ASG and Jemaah

Islamiyah (JI) terrorists. Her visit with U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) and AFP personnel underlined their cooperative effort through community relations and development programs to deny safe haven for the terrorists and actively encourage local support for the AFP's combat operations. JSOTF-P's Military Information Support (MIST) team briefed U/S Hughes on how their efforts -- in conjunction with their AFP partners, USAID, and State colleagues -- have yielded huge dividends on Jolo, helping residents to see that a better future for themselves and their children is possible by rejecting extremist ideology and terrorism. MIST plays a front line role in Mission efforts to promote the Rewards for Justice Program. U/S Hughes received a representative sample of MIST products - comic books, posters, trading cards, etc. -- in a book bag of the type given to local school children.

Stability and Development: The Civilian/Military Compact

¶4. U/S Hughes' visit to Jolo continued with an extended stop in the village of Maimbung, which is on the front lines of the AFP's efforts to end the ASG/JI reign of terror on Jolo. U/S Hughes toured a high school connected to the Internet through USAID's Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC). USAID also equipped a home economics room with sewing machines and other livelihood skills training equipment, using an Education Awareness Support Effort (EASE) grant to match the funds raised by local parents. Subsequently, U/S Hughes spoke to local residents at a JSOTF-P and AFP personnel Medical Community Action Program (MEDCAP), praising the efforts of all involved in ending terror on Jolo. U/S Hughes was also the guest speaker at the inauguration of a farm-to-market road, funded by USAID, where she described the road as "not only a highway connecting your village to ports and markets,

MANILA 00000411 002 OF 003

but it is also your path to a brighter future." The senior Philippine official present, Under Secretary Virgilio Leyretana of the Office of President, subsequently wrote to U/S Hughes saying: "Your visit to Sulu...was historic, and a clear reaffirmation of the commitment of the American people and government to the attainment of peace and development in Mindanao."

A Partnership Built on Shared Sacrifice

¶5. U/S Hughes continued her Philippines program on January 26 with a moving event at the Manila American Memorial Cemetery attended by World War II veterans of the Bataan Death March and the defense of Corregidor. The Cemetery -- the largest American military cemetery outside the US -- comprises 17,000 American, Filipino and other war graves, as well as a memorial for an additional 36,000 whose remains have never been recovered. U/S Hughes had coffee after the ceremony with 50 US and Filipino WWII veterans, representing the Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, the American Legion, the Philippine Veterans Legion, and the Veterans Federation of the Philippines. In her remarks to them and assembled media, she said, "As the daughter of a veteran, and with many relatives who fought in World War II, I find it very moving to be here. It's a reminder of the shared sacrifice Americans and Filipinos made, standing side by side, for freedom. We were friends yesterday, we are friends today, and we will always be friends tomorrow."

The Human Bridge between Nations

¶6. After a brief historical tour of the U.S. Embassy, U/S Hughes taped an interview with "Bantay OCW," a daily TV show aimed at millions of Filipino expatriate workers and appearing on cable television networks in the Americas, East Asia, Europe and the Middle East. U/S Hughes was the first USG official to appear on this important program. Against a backdrop of Manila bay and the U.S. Embassy, U/S Hughes discussed US-RP partnership in the global war on terror, in development, and her impressions of her visit to the Philippines.

Touching Base with Key Partners

17. U/S Hughes and Ambassador had lunch with key Philippine civic activists, all of whom are alumni of various State Department-funded programs. International Visitor (IV) alumni were uniform in praise of their programs, saying it had given them a wealth of useful information and a much richer understanding of American society and culture. This point was made with particular conviction by FY-06 IV alumna, Grace Padaca, who - despite being disabled by a childhood bout with polio - became first a successful investigative journalist and then governor of Isabela province, defeating the representative of a powerful and long-entrenched political clan. "You can't understand the U.S. without a first-hand, in-depth look at it," she said. "Everyone thinks they know America, but what they know is a distorted image, a collection of clichs. To really understand America, you have to go there and be immersed in it - and that's what the IV program does."

18. Among other participants were three leaders of IVP-PHILS, which bills itself - accurately, we believe - as the largest and most active IV alumni organization in the world. They reported to U/S Hughes on an event they organized, with funds from a State/ECA alumni grant, that brought together Muslim and Christian high school students from across Mindanao to work on projects to encourage mutual understanding and achieve peace in that strife-torn region.

19. Participants also complimented USG outreach activities in the Philippines. One event that had a particularly strong impact with youth was the Ambassador's highly publicized presence at the Philippine college basketball championship game. "That was great you took time to go to the game," one guest said. "It showed you really cared about our country and what matters to us." U/S Hughes described this as an example of the "diplomacy of deeds," in which understanding and respect are achieved not by what one says, but what one does.

Discovering Shared Values through Exchanges

18. U/S Hughes also toured an American Corner, and met with a mixed group of Muslim and Christian high school students from ECA's YES and YLP programs. The students warmed to U/S Hughes quickly and

MANILA 00000411 003 OF 003

shared their experiences and viewpoints about the U.S. One member of an indigenous tribe in Mindanao said that he was impressed by the orderliness and politeness of American society, but "inspired by the story of America," which he sees as more ethnically diverse than the Philippines. "America has more than one color, one religion," he said, and added that the problems of his tribe were small compared to the obstacles Americans had faced and overcome. He is now trying to organize his tribal community and tell them "We can do this. I can do this, because I am not alone."

19. A Muslim from Mindanao said that she learned that "people suffer because of ignorance," and because of her experience in the US she wants to bridge the gaps between people. Citing the example of her American host family, who invited her to attend Protestant religious services with them, she said "I learned that I respect them despite our religious differences." U/S Hughes asked her and the other participants if they were surprised to find that Americans are quite religious. Most students promptly answered "yes." Another Muslim girl added that she even enjoyed the Christian services she attended because they helped her to understand her host family's religion. She explained, "I like the way they sing their songs and participate actively in the service... I was like a Christian, myself, for a while...without giving up my [own] religion, of course."

10. Another student who has a growth disorder and is less than 5 feet tall described finding a way to really connect with his classmates in small-town Kansas. He realized that his hosts loved American football, so he asked if he could join the team. At first kids laughed at the very idea because, as he pointed out, "I am so small." But, when they saw his earnest desire to take part, somehow, they made him the team's student manager. He said that one high point of the experience was telling the enormous football

players, "drop and give me 50, then run 2 laps!"

¶11. The dialogue clearly showed that ECA-funded student exchange programs are directly changing lives and laying the groundwork for a stronger, deeper understanding and appreciation of the U.S. by successor generations of Filipinos. By promoting mutual understanding and respect for diversity, these programs are a key element in denying moral and substantive support to extremists of all stripes in this country. As U/S Hughes said in closing the session, "We have to wage peace together, in order to win the peace."

Bringing It All Together

¶12. The visit ended on an informal note, with a barbecue hosted by Ambassador for Filipino and U.S. public affairs personnel from State, USAID, and the U.S. military. U/S Hughes thanked everyone on the multi-agency team for ensuring that the story of America is heard in the Philippines.

Maximum Impact at an Opportune Moment

¶13. U/S Hughes' visit breathed additional life into a vibrant US-Philippine partnership marked by shared values and history. At a period in time when China's rise as a world power and dominant regional player is center stage, her presence reminded the Philippines and beyond that the relationship with the U.S. is not only relevant but also central to achieving peace and prosperity. U/S Hughes' combination of gravitas and personal warmth struck a strong chord with the Filipino public, as well as the media covering events. The impact of this was evident in the glowing press coverage of U/S Hughes' activities throughout her visit.

¶14. U/S Hughes did not have the opportunity to clear this message.

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